

The Folly and Scandal of the Cross



Thrust Statement: God comes to the world in and through Jesus Crucified.

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:18—2:8

If you had lived in the first century and had heard about God becoming flesh and dying upon a Cross for a sin offering, how would you have reacted? In the twenty-first century, how do you react to the death of Jesus upon the Cross? Have you accepted Christ as the One who introduces meaning and order into one's human relationships? Do you think God belongs to the childhood of humanity and that you have outgrown your need of Christ through education? Do you think you have outgrown your need of Christ through your own moral achievements? Men and women cannot determine their own worthiness for the kingdom of God through their own moral achievements. Without Christ, one observes the world seeking something that is loftier, at least to them, than the message about God's Way of salvation. Yet, Christians need to stand firm and proclaim Jesus as the only way of salvation ([Acts 4:12](#)). In the words of J. H. Oldham, "The Cross cannot be taken out of Christianity without changing it beyond recognition."[\[1\]](#)

It is only in Jesus that the guilt of sin, which separates man from God, can be removed. This truth that Jesus is the only way to God is a truth that is always single and exclusive. In this spiritual truth ([4:6](#), "I am the way"), Christians cannot be tolerant. This one truth excludes the possibility of recognizing any other substitute, or way, to God. It is in Jesus that God has found, as it were, a firm footing with humanity ([Romans 3:21-26](#)). The presence of God in one's life begins in Christ Jesus ([2 Corinthians 5:19](#), "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ"). Without Jesus there is no hope. God sent and gave Jesus for the salvation of men and women. As one reflects upon the Incarnation, one comes away with the understanding that the Incarnation is the divine and merciful answer to humanity's falling away from God. One can expect deliverance only through the act of God in sending His Son for the sins of the world ([John 3:16](#), "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son").

It is only through faith in Him that one can expect deliverance from condemnation ([3:36](#), "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life"). Faith is God's gift to humanity.

Faith in His Son is the only means of redemption. God in His wisdom chose faith as the instrument, or channel, through which He would impute (credit) His righteousness to the one who puts his or her faith in Jesus for salvation ([Romans 1:16-17](#), “a righteousness that is by faith from first to last”). Faith in Jesus means allowing oneself to be humbled, and, at the same time, faith is the boldness in which one accepts the unspeakable mercy of God in and through His Son Jesus. For one to live in faith is to live in a spirit of thankfulness for the Cross of Calvary. The Christian life is a life of thankfulness for God’s mercy in and through His Son Jesus. The message of the Gospel should melt the hearts of men and women. What does the Cross mean to you? Do you sing to God in your heart about redemption?

As you reflect upon salvation, do you think that God’s way of salvation is foolishness? Is God’s way of salvation a scandal to you? Do you understand the wisdom and love of God in providing a way of rescue from His righteous wrath through faith, not works? According to Paul, the message of the Cross is the mystery of the Gospel that had been hidden from ages past ([Ephesians 1:3-14](#)) but is now revealed. Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, addresses the so-called folly (μωρία mwria) and scandal (σκαυνηδαλον skandalon) of the Cross (σταυροψ stauros) in the lives of Gentiles and Jews. For both the cultivated Gentile and the virtuous Jew, the story of Jesus dying upon the Cross was sheer folly and a shameful scandal.

In today’s society, many feel that they no longer need religion, as they call it. The church cannot and must not relax its task of reaching out to the world at large. W. A. Visser’t Hooft correctly states: “The task of the Church is to carry forward the work of the Redeemer.”^[2] People are living in a modern society of scientific technology. Yet, one witnesses suicide among young people under the age of twenty-five as the third leading cause of death.^[3] People have a need to belong, at least to something that gives identity. In the USA, youth gangs have increased by 286 to 4,800 during the years 1980—1996.^[4] This report states: “Now, as then, gangs provide identity and social relationships for some young people who feel marginalized by the dominant social, economic, and cultural environments in which they live.”^[5] This report also calls attention to certain behavior before it is classified as a gang: “A group must be involved in a pattern of criminal acts to be considered a youth gang.”^[6]

With scientific knowledge and the so-called higher education of no absolutes—truth is relative—one quickly realizes that humanity has not arrived at the glorious age of utopia. Knowledge and the wisdom of the world have not overcome the great enemies of human life. The world is not becoming better and better with the passing of time. War and hate still plague this world. World War I (1914-19018) and World War II (1939-1945) reveal the wisdom of the world, a world without God. During WW I, there were over 8,528,831 who were killed or died as a result of this atrocity.^[7] These statistics do not suggest that one should do away with science, but rather to remind individuals that the modern world does not touch the problem of humanity—sin. The only thing that will correct the problems of the world is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the crucified One.

The Cross of Christ is a condemnation of the values of the world. It is through the Cross of Christ that God reveals His wrath against sin, and, at the same time, it reveals His purpose to save the world. God has chosen the Church as the vehicle to communicate to

the world this message of salvation through Jesus. Many today are conscious that something besides knowledge is needful if one wishes to introduce meaning into human relationships. One who has been given grace as a sinful human being will desire to share this grace with others. The one who has received this grace undeservedly cannot be intolerant or arrogant toward others. Jesus and Him crucified is the answer to humanity's dilemma. In the words of Emil Brunner:

In fact, we may say, love as grounded in Jesus Christ is the only sure antidote against arrogance and intolerance, because this love springs from the humiliation of man, who acknowledges that truth is not in him, but comes to him, has come to him, and must come to him always, if he is to stay in it. And that truth can never be his own property but is always a present of divine mercy.^[8]

Humanity is stuck fast in the mire of heavy mud, a mud that will not turn loose. One cannot lift himself or herself out this mud of hopelessness. J. H. Oldham is correct when he writes: "Every effort to save ourselves is a fresh assertion of our own individual will. And it is our individualism, our self-centeredness and self-sufficiency that separate us from love."^[9] God comes to the world in Jesus Christ. Only God can bring about rescue from the dilemma that men and women find themselves in. Numerous individuals within the Christian community seek to earn their salvation through perfect knowledge and obedience to certain rituals performed in a so-called worship service. The message of the cross is not central in their theology.

Many Christians have not understood this revolutionary doctrine of justification by faith in Jesus. For countless Christians, Christianity is a legalistic code, not the gift of God. Christianity has been watered down by rationalism and legalism. Unity within the fellowship of the redeemed can only find expression in the common faith, namely, Jesus (**John 17:20-26**). One can never obtain unity within the fellowship of the redeemed when the Gospel is transformed into a new law. This new law equals tradition and this tradition is accepted on a footing of equality with Scripture. The Church is an inward fellowship of faith and love based upon the finished work of Christ upon Calvary, not perfection in understanding of God's Word (**Galatians 3:6-9**).

As one reflects upon **1 Corinthians 1:18—2:8**, one discovers that the revelation of Jesus Christ is the unique event in history—God became flesh in order to save mankind (**John 1:1-18**). Lots of Christians still trust in their own performance in the hope of becoming pious and well pleasing to God (see also **Romans 10:1-3**). They do not rely upon the finished work of Christ upon the Cross. God comes to His creation in Jesus Christ, the savior of sinners. For the Christian, the Incarnation, the death of Christ, and the resurrection constitutes the fundamental truths of the Christian faith. What is your theology of the Cross? As one seeks new life, one cannot begin anywhere else except in the deed of Christ upon the Cross. As one approaches this text of Paul in his Corinthian correspondence, one cannot help but reflect upon the final revelation of God in Jesus—the story of God's act of mercy. Since one cannot save himself or herself, one must turn to the Old Testament to piece together God's scheme of redemption revealed earlier through His Law, His prophets, and His writings. It is in this vein that Brunner writes:

That is the meaning of the story which begins with Abraham and Moses and proceeds to the prophets, including that greatest of the prophets, who tells us of

the servant of God who suffers for our sakes and burdens himself with our guilt.

[\[10\]](#)

From just a casual reading of the Gospels and Acts and the Epistles, one is immediately conscious that to both the cultural Greek and the pious Jew that the message of the cross was sheer folly as well as a scandal. Paul, in his pericope about Christ, the Wisdom and the Power of God, writes: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (**1 Corinthians 1:18**). With all the wisdom of the ancient world, the Gentiles were still groaning under the burden of sin and longing for some hitherto unknown remedy that would be adequate to the wants of their entire nature. On the other hand, the Jews, even with their Law, also were longing for something that would ease their conscious. Neither Gentile nor Jew could eliminate the burden of sin. Before God could send His Son, God had to prepare mankind for the reception of Christianity. He did this by making both Gentile and Jew conscious of their own helplessness—one without the Law and one with the Law.

Paul expresses God coming in the flesh this way: “But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law,⁵ to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” (**Galatians 4:4-5**). What was the message that Paul and others declared throughout the Empire? Luke, a companion of Paul, gives a number of Sermons in the **Book of Acts** from which one can discover the focus of their message. The following four sermons found in the **Book of Acts** illustrates the central theme preached wherever they went: (1) **Acts 2:14-39**, (2) **3:12-26**; (3) **4:8-12**; and (4) **10:36-48**. Peter began his Pentecostal sermon with the pronouncement that the promise of the coming of the Messiah had arrived (**2:14-16**). This sermon summarizes the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (**2:22-35**). One also observes that this sermon announces that the events that had just transpired were the fulfillment of prophecy (**2:14-22; 2:29-35**) And finally, one observes the invitation for men and women to repent and to be baptized and to receive the Holy Spirit (**2:38**).

In this first sermon by Peter, one observes the centrality of the crucifixion. The Cross of Jesus stands out in a very vivid manner: “This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men,^b put him to death by nailing him to the cross” (**2:23**). Again, Peter proclaims: “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (**2:36**). In Peter’s second sermon, as recorded by Luke, to some onlookers, after talking about the death of Jesus, proclaims: “Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders.¹⁸ But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ^a would suffer” (**3:17**).

Following this event before the onlookers, one finds Peter and John defending their faith in Christ before the Sanhedrin (**4:1-26**). During the course of the message about Christ, Peter tells the Sanhedrin: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (**4:12**). Then in Peter’s sermon before Cornelius and his household, Peter declares: “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (**10:43**). Just a casual reading of the other sermons in the **Book of Acts** reveals the

same focus—Jesus and Him crucified for the sins of the world.

In spite of the fact that Isaiah had prophesied concerning a suffering Messiah (**Isaiah 53**), the Jews could not harmonize the words of Moses in the **Book of Deuteronomy**: “Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse” (**21:23**). The Cross to the Jew was an insuperable barrier to the acceptance of Jesus as the promised Messiah. The apostles sought to overcome this obstacle by citing the prophets to prove that they had foretold these events, even the resurrection of Jesus. The apostles demonstrated from the Old Testament that this Servant of God paid the debt for the sins of both men and women. He did this in order that He might overcome the distance between God and sinful humanity. He suffered a criminal’s death in their place. He removed all barriers for one to approach God. Yes, Jesus cleared the way for everyone to approach God, something that no man or woman could do. Jesus suffered the accursed death that everyone should have suffered. Jesus tells Nicodemus: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,^f that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (**John 3:16**).

These remarks of Jesus to Nicodemus go right to the heart of redemption. God sent His Son in order that everyone who trusts in Jesus could stand before Him. Salvation is about what God has done, not what man has done. It is all God’s doing; it is His work of grace. Sins are remitted by His pure gift of grace. All this praise for salvation falls on God alone—nothing on behalf of the work of men and women. Paul writes: “It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.”³¹ Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord”^b (**1 Corinthians 1:30-31**). These two verses capture the very essence of the folly and scandal of the cross. The message of the Cross leaves everything to the operation of God for salvation; it is God’s gift of grace. Paul writes about this message as being “the power of God”: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (**1:18**).

The Greeks seek after wisdom, but the Jews desire their good works to merit their favor with God. It is in this vein concerning the Jews’ desire to earn their salvation that Paul penned the following words:

Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.² For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge.³ Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness (**Romans 10:1-3**).

This salvation by grace through faith was too easy for the Jews. If salvation is really the operation of God, what is there for one to do? Will this attitude not open the floodgates for a life of wickedness? Is there no room for one’s own sense of responsibility? Will not such a message of justification by faith make life trivial and worthless? Is there a case for one’s own exertion of good works in his or her own life as a believer? For the Jews, this message of salvation through the finished work of Christ on the Cross was a stumbling block. The message of the Cross is about God’s wisdom versus man’s wisdom. God’s wisdom consists in His making salvation available by faith alone in His Son Jesus. Paul calls attention to the distinction:

For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength (**1 Corinthians 1:21-25**).

Since all individuals have sinned, there is no way that one can bring about his or her own salvation. Paul paints a portrait of the Gentiles' dilemma in **Romans (1:18—2:16)** without the written Law of God and the Jews' dilemma (**2:17—3:19**) with the written Law of God—both are still under condemnation. In his summary, he writes:

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin (**3:19-20**).

For Paul, the Law shuts everyone's mouth. Even though Paul draws a rather dismal picture of fallen humanity's plight, he does not leave men and women without hope. He concisely states in **Romans 3:21-31** what he develops in (**1 Corinthians 1:18—2:8**). Paul never tires of writing about the message of the Cross—Christ crucified. Listen to Paul as he seeks to unfold the mystery of God's wisdom to both Jew and Gentile:

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement,^a through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— ²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. ²⁷ Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. ²⁸ For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. ²⁹ Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, ³⁰ since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. ³¹ Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law (**Romans 3:21-31**).

Within the Christian community today, many Christians still cannot believe that salvation is by faith alone in the finished work of Christ. This rejection of salvation by grace is a revolt of one's natural pride. Paul labored the point of Abraham's justification through faith in the **fourth chapter of Romans**. Pay attention once more to Paul as he

seeks to drive home this point:

If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God.³ What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness”^a (4:2-3).

How did Abraham receive the righteousness of God? Paul says through faith. The message of the Cross is the Gospel of God. Justification by faith is an act of grace and mercy, not works. The message of the Cross is God’s wisdom. This wisdom is demonstrated in making Jesus one’s righteousness. How does this happen? Is it by works or by faith? Paul labors this point in the Roman letter. In **Romans 1:16-17**, Paul lays down the theme—justification by faith:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.¹⁷ For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last,^a just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”^b

Those in Christ are in Christ because of God (**1 Corinthians 1:30**). Jesus Christ is God’s wisdom. How? God’s wisdom is displayed in and through Jesus by His being made our righteousness, our holiness, and our redemption (**1:31**). This new life in Christ cannot begin anywhere except in the deed of Christ upon the Cross. In the Cross of Jesus one witnesses the redeeming act of God—His wisdom. Since salvation is by faith in the atoning work of Christ, does this not open the doors to a life of rebellion against holiness in one’s daily walk? The answer is no! Paul deals with this philosophy in **Romans 6**. One wonders how anyone could appropriate God’s gift of redemption and continue to live a life in defiance of God’s grace (**Titus 2:11-14**). The simplicity of this new obedience is that one seeks to do what is good and pleasing to God because of His grace. Every believer seeks to live his or her life in such a way that it becomes an expression of the prayer taught by Jesus to His disciples: “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (**Matthew 6:10**).

Whenever one seeks God’s guidance, God’s grace influences his or her ideas and ways. When one exercises faith in Christ, one is conscious that one’s past is buried in Christ under the Cross—one’s guilt is there. For every believer, Christ is the object of his or her faith—the crucified One. Since this is so, every Christian’s morality is as a result of his or her faith. One cannot have Christian morality without having faith in the crucified One. Are you living in the love of God so that you reflect the rays of His light in your life? The meaning of His death on the Cross is exemplified in one’s walk with Him in holiness. God’s act in Christ gives one the incentive to let his or her light shine so that the world may glorify God (**Matthew 5:13-16**). Do you worship God in your daily walk? When one fails to have a high regard for God, true faith ceases to exist in his or her life. One might say, according to Brunner, “The end of true reverence is the end of true religion.”^[11]

CONCLUSION

In **1 Corinthians 1:18—2:8**, Paul discloses the revelation of forgiveness through

Jesus Christ. This enigma about holiness and mercy is what baffles the minds of both men and women. For the world, God's honor and God's wrath have no place within a philosophical concept of God. The God of the philosophers is not the God of the Bible, but of thought. The God of the Bible is described as: God is love. As one reflects upon God's Law, one is conscious that law, in and of itself, is unchangeable, static, timeless, and the eternal will of God. From this point of view of the law, there can be only one possibility—destruction for disobedience. Yet, the Gospel of God, which is disclosed in Jesus, is about God's love. This love takes hold of us in Christ. The sending of Christ was the only way for God to maintain His justice, and, at the same time, justify sinful humanity (**Romans 3:25-26**).

Even today, within many Christian communities, one discovers that scores of believers still cannot accept this radical message of free grace. In **1 Corinthians 1:18—2:8**, Paul sets forth forgiveness and justification of the sinner through the suffering Servant of **Isaiah 53** as the folly and scandal of both Gentile and Jew. The message of the Cross is the unity of God's holiness and God's love manifested in the crucified One. The message of the Cross is that through Jesus, God has broken down the barrier of sin that separated Him from His creatures. It is in Jesus that God has linked humanity to Himself in peace and reconciliation through belief in the One who made atonement for the sins of the World. It is in Christ crucified that God reveals that His love is unconditional (**Romans 5:6**, "When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.") It is in Jesus that the guilt of sin is removed.

As one peruses the world religions, one thing that one will never find in the religions of the world is that God became a man in order to redeem man. One will never find in the religions of the world the teaching that a man came to earth to reconcile fallen humanity to Himself by the sacrifice of His life for those who had become separated from Himself through their guilt and sin. This teaching is what appeared folly to the world at large. Yet, this teaching is what separates Christianity from the religions of the world.

The Gospel of Jesus is just this—sinful men and women who are estranged from God through their sins are restored by the fact that Jesus, the Son of God, gave His life a ransom for many: "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many," said Jesus (**Matthew 20:28**). The Gospel of Jesus is about the guilt of sin being removed in and through Jesus Christ. The Gospel of Jesus reveals that men and women do not find a way to God, but rather God comes to all through faith in His Son. God's purpose is to save the world in and through Jesus. As one reflects upon the message of the Cross, one discovers that the Cross of Jesus is a condemnation of the values of the world. The following words of Paul in this study (**1 Corinthians 2:1-8**) sums up Paul's desire to know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified:

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.³ I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power,⁵ so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age,

who are coming to nothing.⁷ No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

[1] Dr. W. A. Visser't Hooft and Dr. J. H. Oldham, *The Church and Its function in Society* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1938), 142.

[2] Ibid., 31.

[3] National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, "Suicide Prevention Fact Sheet" [on-line]; available from <http://cdc.gov/ncipc/factsheets/suifacts.htm>; Internet; accessed 20 October 2003.

[4] Youth Violence Prevention, "Gangs" [on-line]; available from <http://www.safeyouth.org/topics/gangs.htm>.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] "Table 4: Armed Forces Mobilized and Casualties in World War 1" [CD-Rom]. Deluxe Edition 2002. Prepared by John Graham and Royde-Smith, editors of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, copyright 1994-2002.

[8] Emil Brunner, *The Scandal of Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1951). 28.

[9] J. M. Oldham, *Life is Commitment* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), 76, 77.

[10] Emil Brunner, "The Folly and Scandal of the Cross," in *The Great Invitation and Other Sermons* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955), 58.

b Or *of those not having the law* (that is, Gentiles). Footnotes with the letters of the alphabet are associated with the Scripture citations as given in the NIV.

a Or *Messiah*; also in verse 20

f Or *his only begotten Son*

b Jer. 9:24

a 25Or *as the one who would turn aside his wrath, taking away sin*

a Gen. 15:6; also in verse 22

a Or *is from faith to faith*

b Hab. 2:4

[\[11\]](#) Emil Brunner, *The Scandal of Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1951), 27.

c Some manuscripts *as I proclaimed to you God~s mystery*